

The People: A Serious Role-playing Game Designed to Address a Humanitarian Crisis

Abstract: In this article, I present a case study of the serious role-play game *The People*, which was created as a response to the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in cooperation with an engaged collective of researchers and groups of activists. The game combines elements of role-playing, a board game, and cards to present the complexity of the situation in the Emergency State Zone on the Polish-Belarusian border, especially on the practical, social, and institutional levels. The purpose of the tool is to raise the participants' awareness of the current situation and to enhance an active search for solutions to the crisis.

The game enables participants to adopt a perspective of a border zone resident or a refugee, and ultimately modify the rules governing the world to make it fairer. Providing the participants with agency to reconstruct the game environment during the debriefing made it possible to generate numerous possible solutions at the level of direct interventions; e.g., providing shelters in forests, training residents in first aid; legal, e.g., access by doctors and media, allowing humanitarian organizations; and executive, e.g., more effective enforcement of European law. Also, the exposure to goals inconsistent with personal views under significant immersion evokes various strategies to deal with the clash, including passive agreement, rationalization, gentle disagreement, and extreme disagreement. Such a game can inspire a positive change in the level of participants' understanding, interesting solutions, activist attitudes, and empathy towards asylum seekers. However, the game can also expose the dangerous, existing mechanisms that pose a challenge to society, and what should be monitored and possibly mitigated in the future.

Keywords: serious games, refugees, role-playing games, migration crisis, humanitarian aid

Weronika Szatkowska

Center for Simulation Games and Gamification

Kozminski University

w.z.szatkowska@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The troubled times of existing humanitarian crises call for specific and radical reaction means. In this paper, I present the design of a serious role-playing game, *The People*, as a tool to support the search for solutions to the humanitarian crisis currently taking place in Poland. Since August 2021, the Polish society has been struggling to solve the problem of illegal migration on the Polish-Belarusian border (Grupa Granica 2021; HFPC 2021). Despite controversial settings, it became crucial to raise awareness of the problem and initiate a dialogue about possible solutions and consequences from local and national perspectives.

The game was developed in collaboration with *Badacze i Badaczki na Granicy* (Researchers on the Border), NGO *Wolno Nam* (We Are Allowed), and NGO *Grupa Granica* (The Border Group, a collective of engaged activists, lawyers, and researchers) as a tool to facilitate the discussion with high school students and university students on the subject. *The People* is published as open access (print-and-play) for teachers, educators, and facilitators willing to search for solutions and raise awareness amongst youth. The article includes a brief description of the situation and an overview of the game.

2. SERIOUS GAMES AND THE POWER OF ROLE-PLAY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The reason for applying a game in such a delicate area like the refugee crisis is the belief that serious games are significantly effective in teaching complex problems and explaining the big picture behind them in a comprehensive way (Duke 1974, 131-44). Serious games may be defined as experimental,

rule-based, interactive environments in which players learn by taking actions and self-assessing their efforts through feedback mechanisms. Therefore, gaming provides a safe, interactive, and cooperative environment based on a simplified reality in which participants can experiment with decisions and negotiations (Duke 1974, 131-44). While playing, participants “observe the outcomes of their actions, and take responsibility for decision-making via problem-solving competencies, thus leading to a more active, transformative, and experiential reception of knowledge” (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017, 1-33).

There is a broad field of research showing a positive correlation between games, role-play activities, and learning. Games with a role-play aspect tackle four dimensions of learning: knowing, doing, being, and relating (Daniau 2016, 423-444). From a constructivist perspective, players build new knowledge by processing novel information in relation to the elements they have already acquired (Wadsworth 2004, 24-158), including beliefs, experiences, or attitudes. In sociocultural terms, participants create a shared, fictional reality where they interact and learn from each other.

In the face of humanitarian crises, games not only enhance learning but also have a proven contribution to triggering empathy towards refugees, exploring the tough circumstances the refugees face, or revealing inhumane practices (Plewe and Fürsich 2018, 2470-87). Convincing stories can establish a sense of empathy from a cognitive and emotional view to assist people to understand and experience the worldview of others (Lamsa and Sintonen 2006, 106–20). Storytelling constitutes role-play games: RPGs are based on interactive, narrative stories, and mutual sensemaking. Evoking the player’s alter-ego provides unique experiences of alternative perspectives and motivations. Thus, when it comes to fostering empathy, it is essential to help participants (through their alter-ego) identify with the subject of the story and experience real emotions (Belman and Flanagan 2010, 5–15).

Structured role-play is a promising tool for finding solutions, acquiring knowledge, and training skills necessary to navigate within the existing social crises (Hammer et al. 2018, 283-99). In the case of migration crises, it provides the elusive resources needed to democratically negotiate migrants’ integration strategies and understand the refugee perspective through the adoption of a new, temporary social role. At the same time, players have a chance to explore their own identity (Bowman 2010; Daniau 2016, 423-44) and form an attitude toward the problem of the refugee crisis.

In games with the theme of humanitarian migration crises, there are several key elements of design, regardless of the medium and mechanics. This is important because, from the cognitive perspective, the message through design is stronger than the verbal one. First, it is the gameplay and decision-making from the refugee perspective. Second, it is graphical aesthetics pointing out the challenges, harsh conditions, even the application of colors and providing real data, pictures, and stories (Plewe and Fürsich 2018, 2470-87).

Crookall (2014, 416-27) emphasizes that the most fundamental element of the serious game is its debriefing. And the essence of good debriefing is the engagement of the participants. Debriefing can be motivated by various feelings: joy, satisfaction, anger, sadness—but it should touch the depth of the player’s feelings. However, the role of debriefing is dual: in role-playing games, it is also a time for de-roleing—a safe outro from the role. In games related to very serious issues, like refugee crises, it is especially important to not hurt participants mentally, especially those deeply immersed and involved emotionally.

Finally, there have been multiple games focused on the perspective of refugees in a variety of contexts such as *Bury Me My Love* (The Pixel Hunt 2017), *Path Out* (Path Out 2017), and *The Migrant Trail* (Gigantic Mechanic 2013). Such games most commonly explore the fleeing or the life of asylum seekers and foster awareness and empathy towards them. The contribution of this paper and the game *The People* lies in its exploration of the refugee problem additionally through the lens of the community affected by refugees in fragile socio-political settings. This gap is important to address because borderland residents not only need to be more aware and empathic towards refugees fleeing

from war, but they should also know how they can take more meaningful action in relation to the bigger picture and the problems that can arise in this process.

3. THE STORY BEHIND: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS ON THE POLISH-BELARUSIAN BORDER

In August 2021, the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, had started to organize a movement of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq with the promise of a safe passage to Europe, apparently in reprisal for sanctions that Brussels had imposed on his regime. Belarusian security forces transported thousands of asylum seekers to the Polish border for the purpose of escalating the crisis. Most of the people were caught, and illegally and brutally pushed back to Belarus by Poland's border guards (Grupa Granica 2021, 1-37).

Nevertheless, hundreds managed to escape into the forests. Trapped between the violence of the Polish and Belarusian authorities, families lived in makeshift shelters as night-time temperatures fell below zero. In response to the Belarusian threats, Poland increased the presence of border guards and troops in the area and created a two-mile-deep State of Emergency Zone (SEZ) covering 183 villages (Journal of Laws 2021a; Journal of Laws, 2021b). According to recent changes in the law, asylum seekers are obliged to leave the territory of Poland even if they make an application for international protection and without assessing the risk of human rights violation (HFPC 2021).

Dozens of checkpoints control the SEZ, which is inaccessible to humanitarian aid workers and media. The soldiers stop and search every car as police vehicles, drones, and helicopters monitor the area. Every day in the forests, border guards, soldiers, and aid workers try to reach the asylum seekers hidden among the trees. If the Polish forces arrive before the volunteers, they send the migrants back to Belarus, with the risk that their health may deteriorate. Many of those found in the woods can barely walk after traveling long distances on foot. Some have not eaten in days. The people often have signs of hypothermia. There are fatalities (UNHCR 2021).

The big picture of the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border is blurred and difficult to comprehend. Due to the complexity of the crisis, citizens are passive and do not engage in solving the problem. Also, SEZ dwellers are affected by the crisis in the professional, social, or psychological spheres. The tensions that arise within the community only make it difficult to act effectively.

4. THE PEOPLE ROLE-PLAYING GAME AS A SOCIAL INTERVENTION

The People was designed to address a social problem, evoke discussion, and eventually, initiate a change in the perspectives of the players on the ongoing migration crisis. It refers to the concept of games as social interventions: deliberate attempts to change societal assumptions. The game was informed by social intervention design guidelines, including an iterative co-design process, ensuring social realism and acknowledging sociable aspects of the gameplay, in particular the presence of other players (De Giuli, Zamboni, Tion, 2011). In *The People*, each of the game elements was intentionally designed to resemble the reality of the crisis setting.

The game itself simulates a social system in the State Emergency Zone. Players in the game take on the roles of local people living in the SEZ. It is played in groups of 4-12 people. One player represents groups of refugees fleeing. The title, *The People*, refers to the term local people call the refugees in forests.

Goal of the game: The goal of *The People* is to reflect on the complexity of the refugee crisis environment, by immersing into a game set in the Polish-Belarussian border zone. Participants discover the conditions that the refugees face but also deal with the social implications of the crisis in a small, interconnected community living in the State of Emergency Zone. The game raises awareness of the shortcomings of current solutions, being a call to action for the participants.

Goal in the game: The goal in the game is dependent on the hidden motivation (see Table 1). Players either support the fleeing of refugees or block it. If the motivation is to block, players win if more groups of the people manage to leave the SEZ. Oppositely, if players have a hidden motivation *to support*, they win if more groups of the people escape from the forest on the border.

Roles in the game: Players in the game take universal social roles typical for the villages located in the SEZ. Their roles represent either armed forces or civilians. The first group consists of employees of the army, police, or national services (policeman, soldier, border guard, national park guard, volunteer army soldier). The roles that belong to the second group are examples of civil occupations in the SEZ (shopkeeper, lumberjack, teacher, activist, researcher).

Roles in the game are interconnected in a simple way by family ties, friendship, love, or everyday life. This information is underlined in the brief descriptions of the roles that players are given at the beginning. Quite often players face a dilemma: either to follow their motivation or respect the ties described in the role brief. The game depicts the real divisions within the communities – at home, between friends, and among mutually dependent neighbors.

4.1 *The People* Gameplay, Resources, and the Feedback System

The People is an RPG-based mix of a board game with card drafting and simultaneous action selection. The gameplay consists of placing cards on fields face down on the board and discussing them with other participants through the lens of a role. The board represents the Białowieża forest in Poland, where the refugees try to pass every day. The board is divided into 4x6 fields. There is no limit to placing cards on a certain field. The game is played in rounds (days). Every round a group of refugees represented by a pawn (or groups, if there are more) moves forward, or forward to the left/right. One of the participants controls the asylum seekers, by moving the pawn by the end of each round. If the pawn stands on a field with cards placed by other players, the cards are revealed immediately, starting with the top card. Each card influences the movements of the people (pawn) somehow and creates a continuation of a storyline. Citizens do not know where refugees will go, nor do asylum seekers know what to expect in each of the fields, which reflects the uncertainty in the borderland.

The end of the board is marked with a car and the word “cousin,” which informally means a person that transports the people illegally to another country, most frequently to Germany. In real life, the refugees contact the cousin via phone and discuss where, on the forest edge, they could be picked up.

Players who support refugees aim to help them to cross the board, while players whose goal is to block intend to stop the people by placing suitable cards on the board. There is no order for card placement to reflect the chaotic setting and lack of communication between actors of the crisis. Each round players may place up to two cards on the board on a chosen field. Players may try to identify the motivations of their peers by the focus on the revealed cards and the order of placement; however, it is challenging due to confusion and lack of communication.

The movement of the pawn and the storyline based on cards is the basic feedback system. Each

group of refugees has an additional marker showing how many supplies they have left (see Figure 4). It provides information on how many rounds/days the people have for getting to the end of the board (see Figure 3). At the end of every round, the people consume one supply (see Figure 2), which is marked by tearing off the piece of paper. However, the players have a chance to bring additional supplies to the refugees by using a suitable card.

In terms of the decision-making system, players decide by picking supportive or blocking cards (see Tables 2-5) and placing them either on chosen fields or applying them on a player, the latter of which influences the capabilities of other players by blocking their movements for 2 rounds. Decisions depend on internal motivation and strategy. Players either place a card on the board, place a card “on a player” to block/unlock him/her, or exchange up to 3 cards for another from the pile if none of the cards is suitable. Therefore, players decide if they use a card or exchange it. Placing a card gives a possibility to support/block the people in the forest. Applying a card on a player enables excluding him/her from the game for 1 round; however, it always requires a narrative explanation. Therefore players represent e.g., conflicts between family members who intend to get their relatives or friends arrested. However, sometimes people are in conflict with other players who, in fact, share their motivation, but adopt different strategies.

Cards represent means of basic support in the forest, means of legal support, actions of uniformed forces, natural obstacles, and interactions between the community. In fact, they have four specific roles:

- **Educational:** provide information on the situation, means of intervention, and sources of conflict.
- **Decisive:** represent consequences of contradictory actions, lack of an existing solution for the crisis, and negative consequences of chaotic, illegal humanitarian aid.
- **Underline the complexity of the situation on three layers:** social, legal, and ethical.
- **Compose storyline:** develop the story with new events as a result of the collective actions of the participants.

When a group of refugees (a pawn) reaches the “Cousin” or gets 2 International protection cards, the players discover the story behind their migration. If a group of refugees loses all the resources, players never get to know their story and who they were. In the end, motivations are revealed and participants who achieved the goal by blocking or supporting the refugees can recognize each other.

After the gameplay participants reflect together on the cards that should be added to (or excluded from) the game in order to achieve their goals and find a satisfactory compromise for representatives of various organizations. They can also modify the rules of the game, to come up with an ethical, responsible solution for the crisis at the policy or everyday life levels. In total, the game and the debriefing take around 120 minutes.

6. SUMMARY

Playing role-play games promises various social benefits, also in terms of solving problems of migration crises. Games, designed as interventions, have a chance to be a source of new solutions, raise awareness in society, break taboos, but also increase empathy towards people affected by the crisis.

However, it is essential to consider how the design process is conducted, who the stakeholders are to co-design the intervention, and what the presumptions are. There is no objectivity in game design; nevertheless, a purposeful iterative process, and play-testing stakeholders with different points of view provides a chance to translate the reality into a fair experience.

In *The People*, gameplay was designed to emphasize the human dilemmas faced by the inhabitants of the borderland and the psychological mechanisms that guide people with different motivations. Among those mechanisms was also violence justification in the name of obeying orders. However, on the meta level, it serves as a trigger for discussing these attitudes among youth and raising self-awareness.

Therefore, the game functions as a tool for learning, awareness building, and self-reflection, but also as a pretext for generating new ideas in times of humanitarian crisis. In the future, qualitative and quantitative analysis will be carried out to investigate the changes in the awareness of participants, activist attitudes, as well as the long-term impact of the game on its participants.

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Appendix A

Figure 1: Examples of character cards for a member of the Armed Forces and a Civilian.

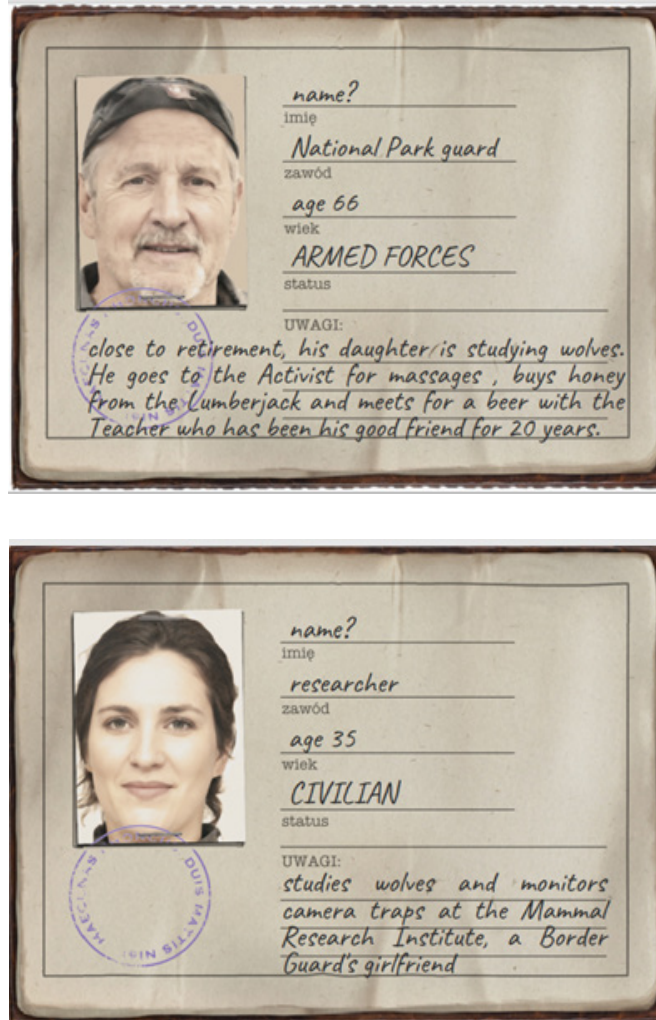


Figure 2: An example of a secret motivation marker: to Block “the people” from crossing.



Figure 3: Model of the board: map of the forest.

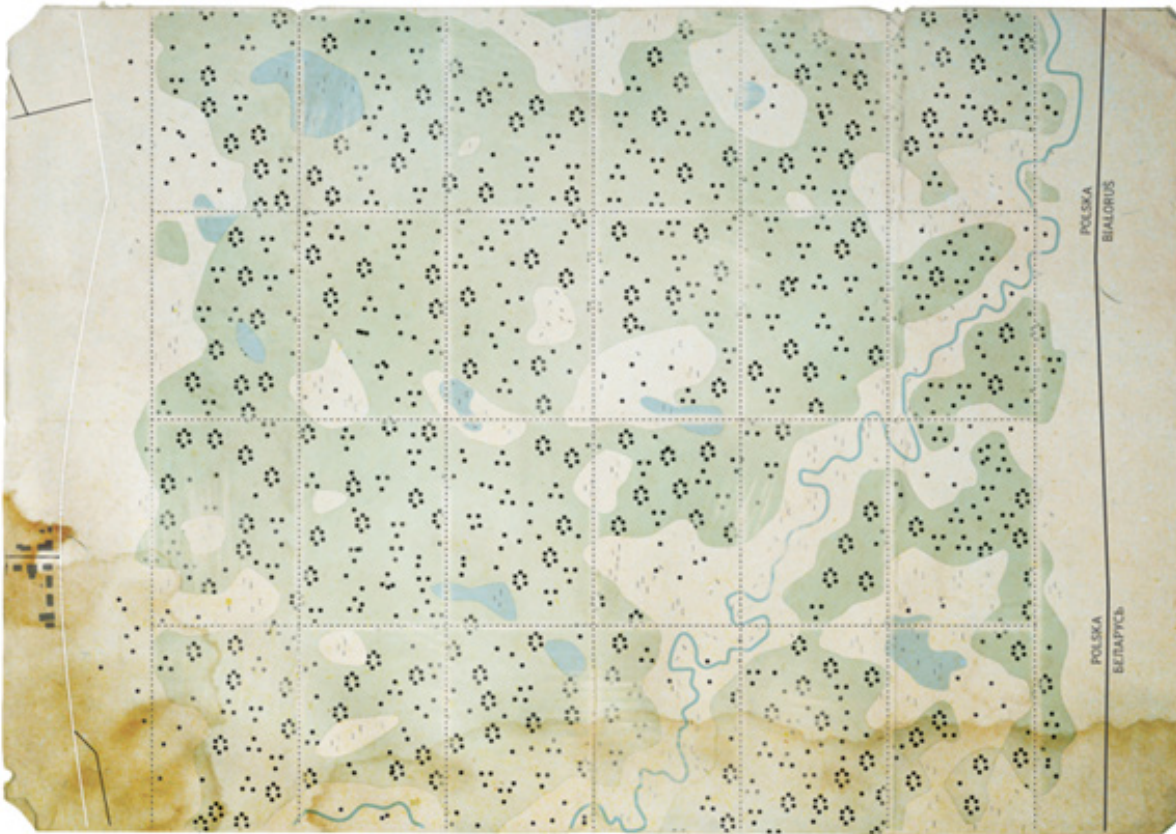


Figure 4: The table with resources such as packs of supplies.

Alpha Group N 22060183 INTERIM <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies	Supplies
	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack	1 pack
	VII 01	VII 02	VII 03	VII 04	VII 05	VII 06	VII 07	VII 08

Table 1: Conditions of victory depend on the hidden profile (motivation) of whether to block or support.

Motivation	Victory conditions
To block	More groups blocked than escaped
To support	More groups escaped than blocked

Table 2: Table with card events of basic support.

	Event Name	Description	Impact on the gameplay	Quantity in the game
Cards of basic support	Sleeping mat	People who enter the forest are often unprepared. They sleep on the ground and get sick easily.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	3
	Sleeping bag	People who enter the forest are often unprepared. They sleep on the ground and get the flu easily.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	3
	Smartphone	A smartphone is the main navigation tool. People also use it in case of emergency or to contact their relatives.	The refugee group moves forward (+2)	2
	Powerbank	Power banks are essential to use smartphones - crucial tools for navigation, emergency, and contact with relatives.	The refugee group moves forward (+2)	2
	Backpack with supplies	Activists (alone or organized in groups) often look for refugees and bring them backpacks with essential supplies. They hide from uniform services to avoid push-backs of the people.	The refugee group does not spend resources on this day (round).	4
	Tent	People who enter the forest are often unprepared. Tents provide minimum thermal comfort and protect from rain/snow.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	2
	Food in jar	Activists cook meals for the refugees hidden in the forests and bring them secretly.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	2
	Medicines	Refugees are often sick because of poor conditions: freezing, hunger, thirst, fatigue and wounds after beating by uniformed officials.	The refugee group moves forward (+2)	2
	Chocolate bar	Sweets are easy in consumption, light and provide energy for further walk.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	2
	Drinking water	The people often suffer from thirst: water in the swamps is dirty and leads to diarrhea.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	4
	Green light	Residents of the Zone light green lamps to show refugees-friendly, welcoming houses. Though, hosting a refugee threatens a prosecution of people smuggling. Also, such houses are observed by uniformed services.	The refugee group moves forward (+1)	4

Table 3: Table with card events of natural obstacles

Cards of natural obstacles	Frost	People face tough conditions conducive to hypothermia, e.g. low temperatures, humidity, and dehydration.	The people don't move despite other cards.	6
	Swamp	There are numerous swamps in the Białowieża forest. People get quickly wet (and cold) by falling there or even drowning.	The people go backward (-2)	4
	Fallen trees	Fallen trees make it difficult to pass and walking over exhausts the people.	The people go backward (-1)	2
	Dirty water	Thirsty people often drink water from swamps or puddles as they quickly run out of drinking water. It leads to diarrhea and serious stomach problems.	The people don't move despite other cards.	4

Table 3: Table with cards of uniformed services.

Cards of uniformed services	Push-back	The illegal procedure of pushing-back the people to the Belarussian border where they are often beaten by Belarussian corps and forced to come back to Polish territory again (and again).	The people go back to the border field (beginning).	4
	Drone watch	Forests are monitored by military drones. If the refugees are found, they are immediately pushed-back to Belarus and start their walk again.	The people go backward (-1)	2
	Helicopter watch	Forests are patrolled by helicopters. The people are afraid of them, so they hide in the forests and wait for a long time. If found, they are pushed-back to Belarus.	The people go backward (-1)	3
	Destroyed phone	Uniformed officials sometimes destroy phones or SIM cards belonging to the refugees to prevent them from coming back to the border.	The people go backward (-2)	4
	Military vehicle	Professional military vehicles with armed soldiers patrol the forests.	The people go backward (-1)	3
	Border guards with dogs	Border guards patrol the forests with dogs to find the people who hide there.	The people go backward (-1)	2

Table 4: Table with cards of legal support.

Cards of legal support	RP Ombudsman	Ombudsman is an official appointed by the government or by parliament to protect the freedom and rights of the people.	Deletes all actions on the field.	5
	Interim	Refugees may obtain the internationally recognized status of refugee. It's a complex procedure, taking up to 24h while they're waiting hidden in the forest.	If 3 are collected, the group is SAVED.	6
	Power of attorney	The people can apply for the power of attorney. Despite that, sometimes they are pushed-back anyway and the papers "disappear."	Deletes all actions BELOW the card.	5

Table 5: Table with cards of interaction between community members.

Cards of interaction between community members	Police	Police in the Zone intervene when it's necessary and control cars/people entering or leaving the Zone. They check trunks and car interiors.	Chosen player is blocked for 2 rounds.	10
	Media	Currently neither media nor humanitarian aid is allowed to enter the Zone. Nevertheless, sometimes media representatives pass illegally and document the situation.	Unblocks the blocked player (including yourself)	10
	Happening	Local people sometimes try to influence the government by organizing happenings - pickets, marches and blocking streets.	Unblocks the blocked player (including yourself)	2

Weronika Szatkowska, MSc. is a researcher and Ph.D. candidate at the Center for Simulation Games and Gamification. She is an academic teacher in the area of Simulation games at Kozminski University in Warsaw. Szatkowska graduated from Warsaw University (BA) and Kozminski/Bradford University with a double Master's degree in International Strategic Management. She is a game designer and a mountain guide. Szatkowska develops games and gamification systems for business and NGOs in the area of urban systems, innovations, social skills, cultural heritage, and popular science topics. Among recent projects, she indicates a serious game *The People* as a means to address the migration crisis and a game prototype for the enhancement of collaborative housing initiatives in Europe.